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After the Arab Spring: power shift in the Middle East?: executive summary

Report

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➤ Executive Summary

Nicholas Kitchen, Editor, IDEAS Reports

The events of the Arab Spring were an inevitable surprise. In a region where political oppression and economic under-development were most keenly felt among a demographic bubble of well-educated youth, the classic conditions for revolution were met. However, few could have predicted the spark that would ignite a wave of protest across the region, the self-immolation of a Tunisian street vendor who felt humiliated by his treatment at the hands of petty local officials.

The final outcome of the protests across the region is still uncertain, but more than a year on, events have settled into patterns sufficiently to allow an interim assessment of their success. Four dictators have been forced from power. Relatively orderly and peaceful political transitions are underway in Tunisia and Egypt, the two countries that led the revolutionary wave in 2011.

Yet the positives are few and far between. Tunisia's transition is mired in sectarian rancour and economic malaise. In Egypt, the hopes of the Tahrir protestors have given way to a military authority concerned only for its interests and no more concerned for human rights than the regime it had refused to support. The Libyan rebels that with NATO's assistance defeated Gaddafi's forces now fight among themselves for the direction of an increasing fractured transition. Syria is in the throes of civil war with no end in sight; Yemen appears to be heading in the same direction.

Moreover, the Arab monarchies, for so long coup-proofed by their oil wealth and US patronage, remain redoubtable, their survival assured by their strategic and economic importance. The world's wealthy returned to the region just last week for the Bahrain Grand Prix despite the continuing repression of protestors by the regime.

Toby Dodge concludes this report by noting that 'successful revolutions are very rare indeed'. Revolutions entail not just regime change, but a reordering of politics: the replacement of ideas as well as elites. There is little evidence that the events of the Arab Spring represent such a revolution in the region. In most cases, the regimes have emerged scarred but broadly intact. Where the protestors have succeeded in forcing regime change, the emerging new elites are conspicuous by their ties to the discredited structures of the past. Moreover, as George Lawson notes here, the protests themselves lacked a genuine narrative of change; united by little more than a generalised commitment to individual rights the protests articulated little in terms of what might replace the prevailing socio-economic contracts in the region.

Behind the headlines then, this report's conclusions are pessimistic. The authors here find little evidence to suggest that future historians will rank the events of 2011 with those of 1848, or 1989. Simply too few of the fundamentals of social, economic and political organisation in the Arab world have been successfully contested by the protests. Of course, the resistance is not over, and this can only be an interim assessment, particularly as policymakers in Washington appear set to escalate the United States' commitment to regime change in Syria, and as the prospect for greater conflict with Iran persists. The transitions underway may yet prove more far-reaching and durable than we predict. But as 2011's Spring turns into 2012's summer, the answer to the question of whether there has been a power shift in the Middle East, is a decisive 'not yet'. ■